An electronic marketplace allows owners of unused Internet domain names to lease the domain names using a bidding process. The system allows owners to monetize domain names and lessees to obtain customers who are redirected from targeted domain names.
OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Advising.com, VisitorBid.com website, Mar. 2004 (6 additional pages are enclosed from this earlier cited reference, referred to as p. 12-17), *
Angwin, “For These Sites, Their Best Assets is a Good Name,” Wall Street Journal, p. B1, (May 1, 2006).

“10,000 Real Traffic Visitors Viewing Your Web Site” at http://cgi.ebay.com/10-000-Real-Traffic-Users-Viewing....

* cited by examiner
Fig. 1d

Network

Domain Name Lessor Personal Computer 100

Domain Name Lessor Personal Computer 100

Domain Name Lessor Server Domain Database 150
Fig. 2b

1. Provide a unique username, a password, and a contact e-mail (2101)
2. Provide bank information (2102)
3. List a domain name to which internet traffic will be redirected (2103)

Decision: Additional Domains?
- Yes (2104)
- No (2105)

Assign lessee a unique identifier and send notification of registration to contact e-mail (2105)
Fig. 2d

1. Provide a unique username, a password, and a contact e-mail
2. Provide bank information
3. Provide maximum dollar amount per day to spend on redirects
4. List a domain name to which internet traffic will be redirected

Additional Domains? [2305]

No [2306]

Assign lessee a unique identifier and send notification of registration to contact e-mail
Login to marketplace

Select a domain name auction

Check if open for bidding?

Place bid that is higher than the current bid and higher than the required minimum bid

Send a confirmation of bid to seller's contact e-mail

Fig. 3a
Receive from Lessee Server 250, keyword, cost-per-visitor, geo-targeting, destination website.

Identify domains in auction database 602 that include the supplied keyword, a related keyword, or misspelling of the keyword.

For each domain found create an expiring bid in the bid database 603 and set an expiration field for the bid. Include a Lessee Server ID, and destination website in the bid.
Check if bidding period ended? 4001

No

Wait one minute 4002

Yes

Check for winning bid? 4003

No

Reopen bidding by setting a new bid end time 4004

Yes

Record the winning bid 4005

Notify winner and domain name owner 4006

Fig. 4a
Fig. 4b-1

Marketplace Server

Receive from Lessor server 150 a domain name from the domain database 151.

Parse out keywords from the supplied domain name.

Check keyword bid amount with Lessee Servers 250.

Yes

Return to Lessor Server 150 the highest bid amount from Lessee Servers 250 and a redirect URL.

No

Domain Name Lessor Server 150
Fig. 4b-2

Domain Name Lessor Server

Is bid higher than existing revenue for the domain. Check domain database 151.

No

Yes

Redirect domain visitors to the supplied redirect URL.
Fig. 6

Lessor's Bank 6002

Marketplace's Bank 6001

Lessee's Bank 6000
DOMAIN NAME MARKETPLACE

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS


BACKGROUND

This invention relates to monetization of unused Internet domain names and online advertising.

Internet domain monetization allows domain name owners to earn revenue from domain names that are unused, e.g., have only place-holder web sites. Currently, monetization is accomplished by placing sponsored links on unused domains, also referred to as "parking" a domain. For example, the owner of cellphones.com might place sponsored links on destination sites such as verizon.com, att.com, and nextel.com. The domain owner is then paid for every click on a sponsored link, or for every click on a sponsored link that results in the conversion of the end user into a customer at the destination site.

Sponsored links are provided by advertising networks such as Google AdWords, Yahoo! Search Marketing, and LinkShare. These advertising networks have agreements with advertisers such as Verizon, AT&T, and Nextel. Alternatively, sponsored links are provided by an intermediary, who specializes in optimizing the revenue produced by unused domains. Intermediaries provide sponsored links from one or many advertising networks. There are a number of intermediaries that provide this type of service including Domain-Sponsor, Parking.com, and Sedo.com.

The main limitation of monetizing unused domains with sponsored links is that it is contingent on end users clicking on links. In many cases only few end users click on the sponsored links and so the domain owner does not monetize the bulk of the Web traffic to their website. For example, in the case of cellphones.com, if 1,000,000 users visit the site every day and only 5% of the users click on sponsored links, then 950,000 of the daily users are not monetized.

Another limitation of monetizing unused domains using sponsored links is that advertisers have their sponsored links placed next to competing services and have to vie for the attention, and clicks, of end users.

A different type of advertising network is provided by TrafficRouter.com. TrafficRouter sells electronic real-estate on websites. Customers can purchase banner advertising space or text advertising links on various websites that register with TrafficRouter. Customers bid to gain the right to have their banner shown on another website or to have a link on another website point to their destination site. The TrafficRouter model also suffers from the limitation that website owners, or domain owners, are only paid when end users click on banners or links. Furthermore, it does not allow advertisers to fully own the user experience.

U.S. Patent Application 20010034657 shows a system that allows domain owners to sublicense sub-domains, also known as third-level domains. For example, the owner of house.com could sublicense chicago.house.com or philadelphia.house.com. This model has two significant limitations. First, it is much more likely that individuals surfing the web would type-in a second-level domain such as house.com compared to a third-level domain such as chicago.house.com. Thus, a service that offers access to second-level domains is much more attractive to advertisers. Second, since sub-domains are simply licensed for a fixed fee, there is no mechanism for identifying a fair price for domains.

On eBay, users sell blocks of traffic. For example, a user might create an auction for 10,000 users who will be sent to the winner's website. The winner of the auction receives traffic from various sources, including redirects from unused domains. A problem with this model is that the advertiser does not get to pick the specific domains that will send it traffic. Another problem is that advertisers are bidding for fixed blocks of traffic, so they have to keep buying blocks in separate lots in order to have a continuous level of redirected traffic.

VisitorBid provided another solution for monetizing domains, allowing advertisers to select individual domains, or pre-selected categories of domains, from which to receive redirected traffic. Advertisers entered bids and competed to receive redirected traffic from domains, but could not enter categories themselves. Advertisers also were not provided with geo targeting options. The VisitorBid model, with an advertiser selecting individual domains or selecting from pre-set categories, is not scalable: It is time consuming to sort through long lists of domains, and requires regular inspection of new domains that become available in the market. Use of preset categories of domains also reduces the granularity of targeting. In addition, the VisitorBid solution suffered from requiring the redirect to occur on the client side instead of the server side. This affects the speed of the domain redirect, because a web page must load within the client browser before the redirect can occur. This gives more time for the end user to close the browser before an advertiser's website loads, reducing the effectiveness of the service.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention creates an electronic marketplace where owners of Internet domain names can have multiple parties compete for the right to lease their domain names. A marketplace provider supplies a technology for redirecting Internet traffic from leased domain names to domain names specified by parties that win the right to lease domain names.

This invention addresses the limitations of the prior art by redirecting users who visit an unused domain directly to one or more advertisers. The advertiser pays a predetermined bid amount per redirected end user. For example, every end user who visits cellphones.com might be redirected to the Verizon website. Thus, the redirect model can result in 100% of end users visiting an unused domain being monetized, instead of only end users who click on sponsored links. Moreover, with the redirect model, advertisers never compete for the attention, and clicks, of end users. The prices for leased domains are set by a marketplace that can weight a number of variables in lease transactions, including monetary bids, time of day/week/year, total revenue received from a lessee, geographic location, customer conversion rate, etc.

The current invention also has the advantage of providing the end user a user experience fully owned by the advertiser: the user need never see an originating website and never has to find and click on a link or banner. Rather, the user is seamlessly redirected to the advertiser site. The invention provides for redirection from the server side, which provides very fast response and much better performance than client side redirects, simplifies implementation, and allows greater advertiser control.
As an example, the owner of espn.com and the owner of sportsillustrated.com might compete to lease traffic from tennisday.com. Each party would submit a bid amount that it is willing to pay for each visitor redirected from tennisday.com to its website. If the owner of espn.com submits a higher bid than the owner of sportsillustrated.com, then the owner of espn.com would win the right to lease traffic from tennisday.com. Individuals that type tennisday.com into their Web browsers would then be redirected using the marketplace technology to espn.com. Biddings can be conducted periodically. For example, there might be only one day a month that potential lessees could bid for domain names.

Each redirect of Internet traffic costs the lessee (the owner of espn.com in the example) the monetary amount bid. The lessee periodically pays the marketplace the monetary amount owed, with the marketplace taking a transaction fee and transferring the balance to the lessor (the owner of tennisday.com in the example).

The present invention allows advertisers themselves to select domains or sets of domains that relate to their businesses, increasing the chances of converting the redirected users to customers. The invention provides a scalable system that allows advertisers to provide extensive lists of specific keywords that pertain to their businesses. The system then automatically finds appropriate domains that match the keywords as they become available in the market. This creates a more vibrant marketplace, and allows advertisers to target niche markets. The present invention also allows for more continuity by having advertisers specify a daily (or other period) budget for redirects, which is fulfilled on an ongoing basis.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1a illustrates the Internet domain monetization marketplace, with the lessee, lessor, and marketplace interacting over a network.

FIG. 1b shows various databases used by the marketplace.

FIG. 1c illustrates another embodiment of the Internet domain monetization marketplace, with lessor, lessee, server, lessee server, and marketplace interacting over a network.

FIG. 1d shows the lessor server and it contains.

FIG. 1e illustrates the lessee server and its contents.

FIG. 2a illustrates registration of a domain name lessor.

FIG. 2b illustrates registration of a domain name lessee.

FIG. 2c illustrates registration of a domain name lessor with the ability to lookup domains.

FIG. 2d illustrates registration of a domain name lessee with a cap on spending over a specified period.

FIG. 3a illustrates biding by a lessee for a domain.

FIG. 3b shows the process of capturing bids based on information supplied by lessee servers.

FIG. 4a illustrates determination of winning bids.

FIGS. 4b-1 and 4b-2 show the process of allowing lessee servers queries for bid amounts that can be earned for a specific domain, then the marketplace gathering bid data from lessee servers and identifying the highest available bid amount, and the lessor servers determining if that bid amount is sufficiently high to warrant redirecting a visitor to the marketplace.

FIG. 5a illustrates redirection of Internet traffic from a lessor website to a lessee website.

FIG. 5b illustrates redirection of Internet traffic from a lessor website to a lessee website by mapping the lessor domain to the marketplace domain name servers.

FIG. 6 illustrates settlement of funds.

FIG. 7 shows matching based on keywords provided by lessees.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

FIG. 1a illustrates a domain name lessor 100 using a personal computer to access the domain marketplace 500 over a network 400 such as the Internet. The domain name lessor 100 registers and lists one to many domain names which that individual or business owns and is interested in leasing to others. A potential domain name lessee 200 using a personal computer connects to the marketplace 500 over the network 400. The domain name lessee 200 then browses the marketplace for open auctions for domain names.

The marketplace 500 can present the information to the domain name lessor 100 and domain name lessee 200 using web pages which require web server software on the marketplace server 500 such as WebSphere from IBM. The domain name lessor 100 and domain name lessee 200 can then view the information using browser software such as Internet Explorer 6.0 from Microsoft.

FIG. 1b shows that the marketplace server 500 requires management of a great deal of information, which for purposes of illustration is shown stored in a number of databases. Those skilled in the art will recognize that a variety of options are available for storing and managing this information. In FIG. 1b, a lessee database 600 holds information about individuals or businesses leasing domain names, such as the name of the individual or business, the domain names being leased, address, e-mail, bank information, etc. The system assigns the lessor 100 a unique system identifier. A lessee database 601 holds similar information about the individuals or businesses interested in leasing domain names, as well as the domain names to which traffic is redirected. The system assigns each lessee 200 a unique system identifier.

An auction database 602 holds information about the domain names being auctioned including for each auction a unique identifier, bid open and close times for every auction period of time (for example every month), minimum bid amount, and the unique system identifier of the lessor 100 of the domain being auctioned. In addition, once an auction is won by a lessee 200, the unique identifier of that lessee 200 is captured in the auction database 602.

A bid database 603 holds the bids in an auction. Each record in the bid database 603 includes a unique bid identifier, the auction identifier associated with the bid, the lessor identifier of the bidder, and a timestamp to capture the time the bid was made. A redirect database 604 is used to redirect web traffic from the lessor domain name to the lessee domain name of the lessee that won the auction.

FIG. 1c illustrates how third party networks of domain lessees and domain lessors can interface with the domain leasing marketplace. In FIG. 1c, a domain name lessor server 150 accesses the domain marketplace 500 over a network 400, such as the Internet. DomainSponsor.com is an example of an aggregator that controls domains on behalf of other lessors and monetizes those domains. Such an aggregator will control a lessor server 150 that manages domains. For each domain in the domain database 151 (FIG. 1d) of domain name lessor server 150, the domain name lessor server 150 queries for revenue that the marketplace 500 can pay. The domain name lessor server 150 then compares the revenue provided by the domain marketplace 500 to the average revenue earned per visitor stored in the domain database 151 and decides whether to send that visitor, using URL forwarding, and be paid the revenue per visitor posted by the marketplace 500.
Next, the lessor provides one or more domain names 2003. For each domain the lessor 100 can optionally provide a minimum monetary amount required to lease the domain 2004. Next, the marketplace 500 assigns the lessor a unique identifier and sends the lessor an e-mail confirming the registration 2006. Finally, all of the information relating to the lessor is stored in the lessor database 600. The marketplace can require proof of or verify the lessor’s right to lease the domain. In an alternate embodiment, the marketplace 500 sets a minimum monetary amount required to lease domains instead of the lessor 100 specifying this amount.

FIG. 2b provides an example of the process by which a lessee 200 registers with the marketplace 500. The lessee provides a unique username, password, and contact e-mail 2101. Next, the lessee provides bank information 2102 including account number, bank routing number, and bank name. The bank information is used to pull funds owed to the marketplace 500 and the lessor 100 on the agreed basis. Next, the lessee provides one or more domain names 2103 to which it would like to redirect Web traffic. As described below, when bidding on a domain name the lessee indicates to which of the domain names provided during registration internet traffic should be redirected. Next, the marketplace 500 assigns the lessee a unique identifier and sends the lessee an e-mail confirming the registration 2105. Finally, all of the information relating to the lessee 200 is stored in the lessee database 601.

FIG. 2c shows an alternate embodiment of the invention. Step 2205 allows the lessor to set a lockout amount and lockout period for a domain, allowing a lessee to receive traffic from the domain exclusively for a pre-specified period. Other steps of the lessor 100 registration are identical to the steps described in FIG. 2a. The first lessee 200 to bid above the lockout amount will then have all traffic redirected from that domain to the winning bidder’s website until the lockout period ends. While the lockout amounts and periods can be set by the lessor during the lessee registration, the lockout values can also be set using a lessee account management feature provided by the marketplace 500. In another embodiment of the invention the marketplace 500 sets the lockout values for lessor domains. The marketplace 500 can set the lockout at any time except when a lockout is in effect for a lessor’s domain.

FIG. 2d shows another embodiment of the invention. In step 2303, a lessee provides a maximum dollar amount per day, or any other time period, for spending on redirected web surfers. Other steps of the registration are identical to the steps described in FIG. 2b. As an example, a lessee 200 such as espn.com could specify a maximum of $1000 per day, which could translate to 10,000 web surfers redirected to the espn.com website at an average cost of $0.10 per web surfer, all redirected from websites owned by lessors using the marketplace services. The maximum budget amount can be modified after the original registration using an account management function. Such a function could, for example, be accessed over the internet on a website provided by the marketplace 500 or by contacting the marketplace 500 by phone.

With this type of a cap on the amount spent per day set by a lessee, the marketplace 500 could redirect all traffic to the highest bidder and when the cap is reached start redirecting traffic to the second highest bidder, up to that bidder’s cap, and then onto the third highest bidder and so on. This mechanism can be used with any bidding embodiments, with lessees able to bid on specific times of day, month, year, geographical locations, etc., and lessors able to optimize lessees to maximize revenue by considering repeat business, segmentation by time and geography, etc.
The process by which a lessor server 150 or a lessee server 250 (FIG. 1c) register with the marketplace server 500 is similar to that described above for individual lessors and lessees. The owner of the lessor server 150 starts by providing a unique name, password, and contact e-mail address. Next, that person provides bank information including account number, bank routing number, bank name, etc. The bank information is used by the marketplace 500 to pay the owner of the lessee server 150, or to receive payments from the owner of the lessee server 250, for redirected domain visitors. All of this information is stored either in the lessor database 600, or the lessee database 601, depending on the type of registrar. Next, the marketplace 500 assigns a unique identifier and sends the registrant an email confirming the registration.

As seen in FIG. 3, a, the process of bidding for a domain name requires the lessee 200 to login 3001 to the marketplace 500 using its unique username and password. Next, the lessee must select a domain name auction 3002 from a list provided by the marketplace 500. Then the lessee 200 must check whether the auction is open for bidding 3003. If not, the lessee must select another auction; otherwise, the lessee can place a bid on the auction 3004. The bid includes a monetary amount that the lessee 200 is willing to pay per web visitor that is redirected from the leased domain name to a domain name owned by the lessee 200. The bid amount must be greater than any other bid placed on the auction. In addition, if a minimum bid amount was indicated by the lessor 100 then the bid must be greater than that amount. The bid must also contain the domain name to which the lessee 200 wants to redirect traffic. Finally, the lessee 200 receives a confirmation through e-mail of the bid.

FIG. 3b illustrates how information sent from lessee servers 250 (FIG. 1c) is converted into bids which are stored in the bid database 603 (FIG. 1b) in an alternative embodiment, where the marketplace searches for an ideal lessor after a lessee places a bid. In step 3011, a lessee server 250 sends a keyword or set of keywords, bid amount (for example, if a cost-per-click is sent it can be converted to a cost-per-visitor, as mentioned above), geo-targeting information (such as US visitors only), and a destination website where visitors should be redirected. In step 3012, the marketplace 500 searches the auction database for domains with the keyword, or keywords, supplied in step 3011. The search could include misspellings or related terms. In step 3013, expiring bids are created for each domain that was found by the search process. Expiring bids have three additional fields including an expiration timestamp that indicates when the bids expire, a Lessee Server ID which indicates the source of expiring bid, and a destination website, indicating where to redirect visitors. Expiring bids and non-expiring bids can be ranked against each other for a domain auction, in the auction database 602 (FIG. 1b), based on the bid amount, geo-targeting, and historical data (such as visitor conversion data). When the expiration date and time is reached for an expiring bid, it is no longer a valid bid. When ranking bids, the marketplace 500 only compares non-expiring bids to expiring bids that have not expired.

FIG. 4a illustrates the process which the marketplace 500 uses to settle the auctions. The process starts with the marketplace 500 checking for an auction whose bidding period has ended 4001 that have bids but no selected winning bid 4003. The marketplace 500 checks the auction database 602 and bid database 603 every minute (or other selected set time) for this information 4002. For every auction found that meets the above criteria, the marketplace 500 selects the highest bid amount and records in the auction database 602 the bid as the winning bid. If a minimum bid amount is available for the auction then the highest bid must be above the minimum amount for it to be recorded as the winning bid. In addition, a record is added to the redirect database 604 indicating the leased domain, the domain to which internet traffic is redirected, a redirect expiration date, and the monetary amount associated with the bid 4005. The domain to which traffic is redirected can be obtained from the bid record. Then the winner and the domain name owner 4006 are notified.

An alternative embodiment is illustrated in FIG. 4b-1. A lessor server 150 sends a request for revenue that the marketplace 500 will pay for visitors redirected from a specific domain. In step 4101, the lessor server 150 sends a domain name from the domain database 151 to the marketplace 500. In step 4102, the marketplace 500 then parses out keywords from the domain name that was sent. In step 4103, the marketplace 500 checks with each lessee server 250 (see FIG. 1c) for amounts per visitor that each can pay given the keywords. Each lessee server 250 with a keyword offered, returns bid amounts from the campaign database 251, and associated destination websites. In step 4104, the marketplace sends to the lessor server 150 the highest bid amount received from lessee servers 250 and a redirect URL. The redirect URL is a URL that points to the marketplace and encodes, as a flag, the destination website (of the website that supplied the highest bid). In FIG. 4b-2, step 4105, the lessor server 150 checks the domain database 151 and determines if the bid amount sent by the marketplace 500 is higher than the average revenue per visitor for the domain. If it is higher, then in step 4106, the lessor server 150 redirects visitors using the redirect URL supplied by the marketplace 500. URL forwarding can be used to perform the redirect. The redirected visitor is sent to the marketplace 500 which then redirects the user to the destination website (encoded in the redirect URL). Again, URL forwarding can be used to execute the redirect. By having the visitor redirected through the marketplace 500, the marketplace 500 can keep track of redirects that occur. Such redirects can be stored in log files or in the redirect database 604.

To help ensure that the marketplace 500 can pay a bid amount indicated to the lessor server 150, the marketplace 500 can place an expiration date on the response to the lessor server 150 in step 4004 of FIG. 4b-1. The lessor server 150 then must not redirect visitors after the expiration date has passed.

In another alternate embodiment, lessees 200 provide the marketplace 500 keywords (instead of bidding on specific lessor 100 domains), bid amounts, and destination websites (see FIG. 1c). Then in step 4103 of FIG. 4b-1, the marketplace 500 checks for the keyword, or keywords, parsed out of the domain supplied by the lessor server 150, among the keywords provided by lessees 200. If matches are found then the highest bid amount is sent in step 4104.

FIG. 5a illustrates the process used to redirect traffic from the website for the leased domain name to the website of the lessor. The process begins when a web surfer 5000 using a browser such as Internet Explorer 6.0 from Microsoft visits the website for the leased domain name 5001. The web surfer accesses the website for the leased domain name over a network 400 such as the Internet. The web server hosting the leased website then redirects the web surfer to the marketplace server 5002. This can be accomplished by having the lessor 100 place an html meta tag in the default page of the leased website that redirects traffic to the marketplace website after the default page is loaded. Next the marketplace 500 confirms that the redirected web surfer 5000 came from a domain name listed in the lessee database 600. This can be
accomplished by having software check the header of the Internet Protocol packets that arrive at the marketplace server 500. Next, if the marketplace 500 successfully confirms the origin of the web surfer, the marketplace 500 checks the redirect database 604 for the domain name to which the web surfer is redirected. The marketplace 500 redirects the web surfer to the lessee’s website 5003 found in the redirect database 604. The marketplace 500 then retrieves from the redirect database 604 the monetary amount to charge for the redirect, and adds a record in the billing database 605 indicating that the lessee owes that monetary amount to the lessor.

A further embodiment of the invention requires lessors 100 to map their domains to domain name servers belonging to the marketplace before lessors can use the marketplace service. In order to point the domains to the domain servers of the marketplace 500, lessors must go to the domain registrar whom they used to buy the domains and change the DNS settings for the domains they are leasing. The DNS settings for the leased domains should be updated to point to the primary and secondary domain servers of the marketplace 500. The domain registrar might also require that the internet protocol address of the primary and secondary marketplace 500 domain servers be specified.

For example, the lessor 100 of tennisdaytoday.com would go to its domain registrar (for example register.com) and change the DNS setting for tennisdaytoday.com to point to the marketplace domain servers, for example server1.marketplace.com and server2.marketplace.com. The domain registrar might also require that the internet protocol address of the primary and secondary domain servers be specified, for example 223.32.24.234 and 223.32.24.235.

Once the lessor domain is pointing to the domain servers of the marketplace 500, the process of redirecting web surfers is depicted in FIG. 5b. Initially a web surfer working on a personal computer 5100 types into his web browser a domain name of a lessor 100. Next, the marketplace domain server 5101 is reached through the DNS architecture and the lessor 100 domain is resolved to the internet protocol address of the marketplace server 5102. Then the marketplace server 5102 then finds the appropriate lessee web server 6103 in the Redirect Database 604 to which to redirect the web surfer.

An alternate embodiment requires lessors 100 to use domain forwarding instead of re-pointing their domains. As with re-pointing domains, domain forwarding can be set up through the domain registrar (e.g. register.com). The forwarding address would be a web address owned by the marketplace 500 and the forward would include the domain name that set to forward. For example tennisdaytoday.com would use the following forwarding address: http://www.marketplace.com/tennisdaytoday.com.

FIG. 6 illustrates the process used to settle funds between the parties. The process starts with the marketplace 500 retrieving a billing record from the billing database 605. The marketplace then retrieves from the lessee database 600 the bank account number and routing number of the lessee associated with the billing record. Next the marketplace, using a technology such as ACH, retrieves the funds indicated on the billing record from the bank of the lessee into the marketplace’s bank account. Once the funds have been deposited into the marketplace’s bank account the marketplace using ACH transfers, a subset of the funds is transferred to the lessee associated with the billing record. The bank information of the lessor is retrieved from the lessor database 600. The funds settling processes is performed periodically, for example once a month.

Instead of using ACH, the marketplace can also use credit cards, debit cards, or solutions such as PayPal to transfer funds. Therefore, in FIG. 2a instead of providing bank information in step 2002, the lessor 100 can provide a PayPal account where funds owed will be placed by the marketplace on a regular basis. Similarly in FIG. 2a step 2102, instead of providing bank information the lessee can provide credit or debit card information. The marketplace then on a regular basis charges the lessee’s credit or debit card the amount owned. Alternatively, all funds owed by a specific lessee can be retrieved using one ACH transaction or one credit or debit transaction that is performed periodically.

In an alternative embodiment of the invention, the auctions for domain names have no time limit. The auctions are always open for bids. At any time a lessee can outbid the highest bid for a domain name. The process for bidding remains as described in FIG. 3. However, the process for finding the winning bid described in FIG. 4 changes slightly. Periodically, for example every few minutes, all auctions are reviewed and if a new highest bid is placed for a given auction the marketplace checks whether the bid is above the minimum bid amount, if it exists, and if so sets the new bid as the winning bid in the auction database 602 and resets the redirect database 604 to the lessee’s domain name indicated by the winning bid. Alternatively, whenever a new bid is placed the marketplace checks in the auction database 602 whether the new bid is higher than existing bids for the given auction. In addition, the new bid is checked to be above the minimum bid amount, if one exists. If both conditions are met, the marketplace 500 sets the new bid as the winning bid in the auction database 602 and resets the redirect database 604 to the lessee’s domain name indicated by the winning bid.

It may be desirable to some lessees and/or lessors to group domain names into categories. Domain names that relate to a certain topic are grouped by the system administrator, either manually or automatically. The group names and the domain names they contain are stored in a group database on the marketplace server. The auction database 602 stores the category name being auctioned and the associated domain names for each auction. The process described in FIG. 3 remains the same, except that lessees bid on groups instead of individual domains. The process described in FIG. 4 also remains the same, except that in step 4005 the marketplace 500 records in the redirect database 604 a record per domain name in the category that was bid on. In addition, in step 4006 all of the domain name owners in the category bid on are notified of the winning bid.

In another embodiment of the invention, multiple bidders win the bidding for a category. During the bidding described in FIG. 3, bidders submit bids 3004 that are higher than the specified minimum. Bids do not need to be higher than other bids made for the same auction. All other steps of FIG. 3 remain the same. Also, in FIG. 4 step 4003 which determines the winning bids the marketplace 500 finds the highest set of bids. For example, the marketplace 500 finds the top three bids placed in the auction. In step 4005, the marketplace 500 records all of the winning bids in the auction database 602 and the redirect database 604. Finally, in FIG. 5a, before the marketplace redirects the visitor web surfer to a lessee 200, the marketplace 500 finds all of the lessees that won the auction for the category to which the leased domain name belongs. The marketplace 500 then picks in order one of the lessee and redirect the user to that lessee’s website. The next time the marketplace 500 redirects to a different lessee among the winning lessees for that category. In order to keep track of the last lessee to which the marketplace redirected a web surfer, the marketplace can mark the record of that lessee in the redirect database 604. The marketplace 500 can start with the highest bid among the lessees and next redirect to the
domain of the next highest bid. When the marketplace \textbf{500} reaches the lowest bid among the winning bids for the category the marketplace \textbf{500} can again redirect to the domain owned by the highest bidder for the category.

Alternatively, when the marketplace \textbf{500} picks among the winning bids, the marketplace could pick the lessee with the higher bid more often than the lessees with lower bids. This can be accomplished by having the marketplace administrator assign percentages to each winning bid, with larger percentages being assigned to higher bidding lessees. Alternatively, an algorithm can be used to assign these percentages. For example, the algorithm could provide the highest bidder with 50% of the redirected traffic, the next highest bidder 30%, and the third highest bidder 20%. Also, the algorithm could redirect all traffic to the highest bidder until some maximum amount of traffic (or expense) is reached for the day (or other period). That maximum amount could be provided by the lessee when bidding. Once the maximum is reached the next highest bidder would get the balance of the redirected traffic until the day ends (or some other period).

The marketplace allows lessees to bid in bulk on domains. For example, a lessee could specify a bid for all domains in a certain category or for multiple categories. Alternatively, the lessee could mutually select a set of domains to bid on and provide one bid value for all of the selected domains. The marketplace then informs the lessee of the domains for which its bid is the highest, or domains for which its bid is one of a set of winning bids.

Lessees can also specify for a set of bulk domains a maximum dollar amount per day, or any other time period, for spending on redirected web surfers. This amount would be in the place of the maximum dollar amount provided during registration described in FIG. 2d.

Lessees \textbf{200} may also provide keywords that relate to the domain name to which they want to redirect web surfers. The marketplace \textbf{500} then matches the keywords with lessees' domain names that contain those keywords. Lessees also provide the amount they are willing to pay per web surfer redirected to their domain. Thus, as part of FIG. 2e, in step \textbf{2103} in addition to providing a domain name, lessees provide a set of keywords that relate to each domain name and a monetary amount per domain name that the lessee would pay per redirected web surfer. Instead of the bidding described in FIG. 3 and FIG. 4, a matching algorithm described in FIG. 7 is used. In step \textbf{7001} the marketplace \textbf{500} checks whether a certain amount of time past since last the time the matching algorithm ran, for example have five minutes past. The last run time can be recorded in the database. If the necessary amount of time has not passed then in step \textbf{7002} the marketplace waits a minute and then returns to step \textbf{7001}. If enough time has passed since last run, then the marketplace \textbf{500} selects one lessee \textbf{7003} and selects one keyword provided by the lessee \textbf{7004}. The marketplace \textbf{500} then searches all of the registered lessor domain names for the keyword. All domain names that contain the keyword are identified and for each match a record is created in the redirect database \textbf{604}. Next, the marketplace \textbf{500} checks if another keyword was provided by the lessee \textbf{7007}, and if so it repeats steps \textbf{7004} to \textbf{7005} for that keyword. Once all keywords for a lessee \textbf{200} have been processed the marketplace \textbf{500} checks for another lessee \textbf{200} that has not been processed. The database can be used to keep track of lessees that have been processed, or matched with domain names. If the marketplace \textbf{500} finds a lessee \textbf{200} that has not been processed, it repeats the steps starting at \textbf{7003}, or else it returns to the waiting state \textbf{7002}. Next, the marketplace \textbf{500} after running the matching algorithm can use a round robin when multiple lessees \textbf{200} match a lessee's \textbf{100} domain name, as described above. Alternatively, the marketplace \textbf{500} can assign percentages to higher bids as described above.

Instead of only matching keywords provided by the lessee, the marketplace \textbf{500} alternatively can look up synonyms and related words based on the provided keywords. Synonyms can be looked up using a dictionary. Related words can be looked up from a database, such as those used in speech processing applications. An example of related words is “baseball” and “bat”. Once related words and synonyms are identified, they can also be used in the matching step \textbf{7006}.

Lessees can also provide keywords in addition to the lessee's providing keywords. Lessees provide keywords related to the domain name they register with the marketplace. This is done in FIG. 2a as part of step \textbf{2004}. In FIG. 7, step \textbf{7006} matching can be done between the key words and related words of the lessees and key words and related words of the lessee, thereby optimizing redirection of web surfers.

Furthermore, in another embodiment of the invention lessees provide a set of keywords and the monetary amount they will pay per visitor redirected to their domain. Lessees register with the marketplace and provide a minimum monetary amount per visitor redirected from their domain. A software program then matches lessees with lessees by finding domain names registered with the marketplace that contain one or more of the keywords supplied by individual lessees; for those domains the program checks that the specified minimum monetary amount is less than the monetary amount supplied by the individual lessees. In cases when multiple lessees are matched with a lessee, a round robin is used to redirect web surfers to the domains associated with the lessees. Lessees with higher bids can receive a higher percentage of redirected web surfers.

Lessees can use an interface provided by the marketplace, such as a web interface, to find a list of lessee domains that relate to a keyword or a set of keywords. The process of identifying the domains is identical to the matching process described above, where keywords provided by the lessee are searched within the lessee domains. In addition to the provided keywords, synonyms of the keywords can be searched in the lessee domains. Misspellings and commonly associated words can also be searched in the lessee domains. Once a list of lessee domains is provided, the lessee can choose to bid on all or a subset of the domains.

A computer program or an electronic agent can be used to assist with the bidding. A lessee would use such an electronic agent to avoid having to manually monitor the bidding on a domain. The electronic agent can be given by the lessee specific domains to bid on and a maximum bid amount per domain. The electronic agent then bids on behalf of the lessee, bidding above other bidders up to the maximum amount specified per domain by the lessee. In another embodiment, the electronic agents do not bid but instead notify lessees when one of their bids has been out-bid. It is then the lessees' decision whether to increase their bids. Notifications can be made using communication media such as e-mail or phone.

In another embodiment of the invention, screen scraping can be used to identify domains that can redirect visitors to a lessee. Instead of receiving keywords from advertisers, or having advertisers select individual domains to bid on, the marketplace \textbf{500} requests from a lessee \textbf{200} a destination website address which the lessee \textbf{200} would like to redirect visitors to from leased domains. The marketplace \textbf{500} then using a screen scraping technology, such as software provided by Fetch Technologies, retrieves from the destination address keywords. These keywords are then used to find domains in the auction database \textbf{602} that contain the keywords retrieved using screen scraping. Bids are then auto-
matically created on behalf of the lessee 200 in the bid data-
base 603 using these identified domains.

In a further embodiment, the web surfer is only redirected
to a lessee’s 200 domain name if the web surfer is identified
as being from a pre-specified geographic location. In this
embodiment, the lessee when bidding in FIG. 3 step 3004
provides geographic restrictions that it would like to have
associated with the bid. The marketplace then uses the
geographic restriction in FIG. 5a step 5002. By looking at the IP
address of the web surfer, the marketplace can determine the
general geographic location of the web surfer. Only when the
web surfer is within the required region will the marketplace
500 redirect that user to the lessee 200.

The lessee 200 can also specify a certain time frame during
which web surfers should be redirected to their site. The
implementation of this embodiment is identical to the one
described in the previous paragraph except that the restriction
is time based as opposed to location based.

Another embodiment uses cookies or IP addresses of visi-
tors to redirect visitors to the same website they were origi-
nally redirected to. In this embodiment, return visits to leased
domains result in referral of a user to the same lessee website.
The cookie could be set to expire after 30 days. Thus in step
4003 of FIG. 4a, the winning bidder is determined by taking
into consideration where a given visitor previously was re-
directed.

The marketplace can also track and capture the action of a
web surfer after he is redirected from a lessee 100 domain to
the website of a lessee 200. One way to accomplish this
tracking is by placing an image link that loads from the
marketplace 500 server on pages belonging to the lessee 200.
Thus, whenever those images are loaded the marketplace 500

15 can capture the action in the redirect database 604.

In another embodiment, user interests are identified by
tracking across lessee 100 domains that the users visit, and are
redirected from. The tracking can be accomplished using a
web browser cookie, or using the IP address of visitors. Such
tracking data can guide decisions about which lessee website fits
a user’s interest, thus determining where to redirect users.
Statistical optimization can be integrated into these decisions.
For example, a user who was redirected from a lessee 100

20 domain “bestCars.com” might subsequently be redirected from a lessee 100 domain “xyz.com” to a vehicle shopping
site such as “autoTrader.com”. The modified ranking of bids,
and thereby redirects, can be incorporated into step 4003 in
FIG. 4a.

It is also possible to place sponsored links on the lessee’s
domain until a lessee successfully bids for the domain, such as
Google’s AdSense. With sponsored links, a set of links are
placed on a web page. Such a web page appears when the
lessee’s domain is typed into a web browser. Each click on a

25 sponsored link makes the lessee some money. Once a lessee
is matched with a lessee, the redirect model can be used instead
of sponsored links.

Winning bids may be determined by multiple criteria, not
just bid amount. Statistical optimization techniques can be
used to select a winning lessee that is most likely to convert a
redirected visitor into a customer. For example, customer
conversion rate and maximum daily budget can also be used
to determine winning bids. For example, in step 4003 of FIG.

30 4, the marketplace 500 can calculate the weighted average of
the bid amount, daily budget amount and customer conver-
sion rate (calculated using tracking information stored in the
redirect database). This weighted average can then be used to
determine winning bids.

An alternative embodiment ranks bids uses statistical
analysis to map independent variables, such as time of day,
geo-location, and browser type to the chance of converting
a customer. By tracking historically how these variables affect
conversion rate of redirected visitors, the marketplace 500
then can decide on winning bids based on such analysis. The
modified ranking of bids can be incorporated into step 4003 of
FIG. 4a.

Yet another embodiment uses visitor interests captured by
third party networks to help optimize redirects of visitors to
lessee domains. An example is use of tracking data from
another network to determine winning bids. A behavioral
targeting network such as Blue Lithium, which uses cookies
to track users as they visit websites on the Blue Lithium
network, could also track users that visit lessee 100 domains.
This can be accomplished by redirecting visitors to the behav-
ioral targeting server, then to the marketplace 500, and finally
to the destination URL. The behavioral targeting server
would place a cookie and thus track visits to lessee 100
domains. When redirecting from the behavioral targeting
server to the marketplace 500, information is sent (for
example, using URL rewriting) to the marketplace 500 indic-
ating other keywords that the visitor has been associated
with by the behavioral targeting network. As an example, if
the user visited “autoTrader.com” and that site is part of the
behavioral network, and then the same user visits a lessee 100
domain “loveDC.com”, the behavioral network can indicate
to the marketplace 500 that that user is also interested in the
keyword automobiles. Such information can then be used
by the marketplace 500 to determine the winning bid in step
4003 of FIG. 4a, which could be a car dealership in Washing-

35 ton D.C.

Finally, another embodiment allows a lessee 100 of a
domain to have domain visitor traffic from certain geographic
regions go to a preferred website, but domain visitor traffic
from all other geographic regions to be bid on. During the
process of adding domains to the system, the lessee 100
specifies per domain the geographic regions that are not to be
bid on, and the destination website for those excluded
regions. Regions constitute zip-codes, postal-codes, cities,
states, provinces, countries, continents, etc. For example, a
regional company owning a generic domain such as “pizza-
.com” could lease the domain in geographic markets outside
its own geographic market. Web visitors coming to the les-

40 see’s domain from outside the lessee’s specified geographic
region(s) would be directed to the websites of winning lessees
in these regions.

While certain representative embodiments and details have
been shown for purposes of illustrating the invention, it will
be apparent to those skilled in the art that various changes in
the methods and apparatus disclosed herein may be made
without departing from the scope of the invention which is
defined in the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for leasing of domain names in an electronic
marketplace, comprising:
(a) receiving domain names from lessors at an electronic
marketplace;
(b) presenting the domain names for lease of redirected
traffic utilizing the electronic marketplace, wherein a
potential lessee can specify criteria for selecting the
domain names on which the potential lessee wishes to
bid;
(c) receiving a bid from each of a plurality of bidding
lessees at the electronic marketplace, the electronic mar-
ketplace including information on lessees, lessees, bid
terms, payment transfers from lessees to lessees;
(d) comparing bid amounts for a domain name matching
the criteria to determine at least one winning bid;
(e) automatically redirecting traffic associated with the domain name to an internet site associated with the winning bid; and
(f) utilizing the electronic marketplace to automatically place a sponsored link on a lessor’s domain at times when no successful bids from lessees have been received for redirected traffic from the domain.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising: establishing criteria for selecting a winning bid for redirected traffic from a domain name, the criteria including at least one variable selected from the group consisting of the online behavior of a visitor to the domain name, the prior redirected history of a visitor to the domain name, the geographic location of a visitor to the domain name, the time period covered by a bid, keywords provided by the lessor and/or potential lessee, the total revenue received from a bidding lessee, the geographic location of the bidding lessee, and conversion rate of visitors to paying customers.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the winning lessee is the exclusive recipient of redirected traffic during a specified time period.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein a plurality of winning lessees receive redirected traffic during specified time periods on a prioritized basis established by weighting at least one variable selected from the group consisting of the monetary amount of each winning lessee’s bid, keywords provided by each winning lessee, the total revenue received from each winning lessee, time of day specified by each winning lessee, the geographic location of each winning lessee, and conversion rate of visitors to paying customers.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein visitor traffic is redirected from lessors to lessees through the marketplace, where the redirected traffic can be tracked by the marketplace.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein the bidding lessee sets a cap to the amount spent in a specified time period for redirected traffic further comprising:
(a) receiving from each bidding lessee a cap to the amount spent in a specified time period for redirected traffic; and
(b) redirecting traffic away from the internet site of a winning lessee when the amount spent reaches the cap.

7. The method of claim 2, wherein a bidding lessee bids for redirected traffic from a plurality of domain names.

8. The method of claim 2, wherein one lessor retains permission to control and manage one or more other lessor domains.

9. The method of claim 2, wherein a bidding lessee may submit new bids at any time in an attempt to outbid a prior winning lessee for redirected traffic, thereby becoming the new winning lessee, further comprising:
periodically automatically repeating (c) to (e), wherein the winning bid changes from one lessee to a new lessee, the new lessee thereby becoming the new winning lessee.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
(a) collecting payment from the winning lessee; and
(b) transferring payment to the lessor of the domain name.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein a plurality of selected lessees receive redirected traffic during specified time periods on a prioritized basis established by weighting at least one variable selected from the group consisting of the monetary amount of each winning lessee’s bid, keywords provided by each winning lessee, the total revenue received from each winning lessee, time of day specified by each winning lessee’s bid, the geographic location of each winning lessee, and conversion rate of visitors to paying customers.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein visitor traffic is redirected from lessors to lessees through the marketplace, wherein the redirected traffic can be tracked by the marketplace.

13. The method of claim 11, further comprising: utilizing the electronic marketplace to automatically place a sponsored link on a lessor’s domain at times when no successful bids from lessees have been received for redirected traffic from the domain.

14. The method of claim 1, further comprising: receiving a user profile variable for a user; selecting a lessee based on the user profile variable; and redirecting traffic from the user to the selected lessee.

15. The method of claim 14, further comprising: determining at least one of the criteria and the user profile variable.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein the criteria is determined by:
receiving a destination website; and
screen scraping the destination website.

17. The method of claim 15, wherein the user profile variable is determined by determining a geographic location of the user.

18. The method of claim 15, wherein the user profile variable is determined by determining a prior website that the user was redirected to, the user being directed to the same website as the prior website.

19. The method of claim 15, wherein the user profile is determined by determining a first domain that the user is directed from and a second domain that the user is directed to after the first domain, the user being redirected to a third website associated with the first website.

20. The method of claim 1, further comprising: receiving a geographic area from the lessor that is not to be bid on, traffic only being redirected to a lessee that is not in the geographic area that is not to be bid on.

21. A non-transitory computer-readable storage medium having stored thereon a set of instructions that are executable by at least one processor of a computer system to carry out a method of leasing domain names, comprising:
(a) receiving domain names from lessors at an electronic marketplace;
(b) presenting the domain names for lease of redirected traffic utilizing the electronic marketplace, wherein a potential lessee can specify criteria for selecting the domain names on which the potential lessee wishes to bid;
(c) receiving a bid from each of a plurality of bidding lessees at the electronic marketplace, the electronic marketplace including information on lessors, lessees, bid terms, payment transfers from lessees to lessors;
(d) comparing bid amounts for a domain name matching the criteria to determine at least one winning bid;
(e) automatically redirecting traffic associated with the domain name to an Internet site associated with the winning bid; and
(f) utilizing the electronic marketplace to automatically place a sponsored link on a lessor’s domain at times when no successful bids from lessees have been received for redirected traffic from the domain.

22. A computer system for leasing of domain names comprising:
at least one processor;
a storage device connected to the processor; and
a set of instructions on the storage device, the set of instructions being readable by the processor and including:
a domain name receiving module to receive domain names from lessors;
at least one data store to store the domain names;
a presentation module to present the domain names for lease of redirected traffic wherein a potential lessee can specify a criteria for selecting the domain name on which the potential lessee wishes to bid;
a bid receiving module to receive bid from each of a plurality of bidding lessees at an electronic marketplace, the electronic marketplace including information on lessors, bid terms, and payment transfers from lessees to lessors, each bid being for a bid amount, the information being stored in the data store;
an association module to associate each bid with a respective domain name matching the criteria;
a comparing module to compare bid amounts associated with the domain name matching the criteria to determine at least one winning bid; and
a redirection module to automatically redirect traffic associated with the domain name to an internet site associated with the winning bid of a winning lessee and place a sponsored link on a lessor’s domain at times when no successful bids from lessees have been received for redirected traffic from the domain.

A method for leasing of domain names in an electronic marketplace, comprising:

(a) receiving domain names from lessors at an electronic marketplace;
(b) presenting the domain names for lease of redirected traffic utilizing the electronic marketplace, wherein a potential lessee can specify criteria for selecting the domain names on which the potential lessee wishes to bid;
(c) determining at least one of the criteria and a user profile variable, wherein the criteria is determined by:
   (i) receiving a destination website, and
   (ii) screen scraping the destination website;
(d) receiving a bid from each of a plurality of bidding lessees at the electronic marketplace, the electronic marketplace including information on lessors, lessees, bid terms, payment transfers from lessees to lessors;
(e) receiving a user profile variable for a user;
(f) selecting a lessee based on the user profile variable; and
by
(g) comparing bid amounts for a domain name matching the criteria to determine at least one winning bid; and
(h) automatically redirecting traffic associated with the domain name from the user to the selected lessee to an internet site associated with the winning bid.